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ON THE PLOT OF THE «ABHIJÑĀNAŚAKUNTALAM»

The «Śakuntalā» has been known in Europe since the end of the eighteenth century[1]. Through the translations of Sir William Jones[2], G. Forster[3], and A. Bruguière[4] it soon became popular, and its beauty was praised by poets like Goethe[5], and János Arany[6].

In scholarship, attention was first drawn to Indian drama and especially to the «Śakuntalā» in the nineteenth century by Albrecht Weber[7], Ernst Windisch[8], and M. Pischel[9]. Following their footsteps, and partly at variance with them, research was continued by A. Smith[10], Sylvain Lévi[11], L. Schroeder[12], A. Keith[13]. and A. Gawronski[14]. The latters were mainly interested in the origins of Indian drama, as well as in the question of its genre as related to European genres[15]. It falls outside the scope of the present study to summarize their results and their debates, but it must be emphasized that their work continues to be the basis of any scholarship dealing with Indian drama.

In analysis of Indian dramas we can always observe a certain distance being kept between the analyst and the play, a repugnance naturally evoked by the spirit, plot, and structure of a work of art so alien from us in feelings and ideas. Thus most studies stress the alienness of these plays. Their alienness, so often referred to, their deviation from the norms of European aesthetics, makes them implicitly less valuable than – or, in better cases, just different from – either Greek or Roman plays in the eyes of the modern Western scholar. This fundamental alienness, however, on a closer examination of the facts, seems to derive primarily from formal factors:

a) Old Indian theatre was never «a theatre for the people» in the sense of Athens or Rome. These pieces were expressly written for a narrow circle of people (priests, rulers, and their people around them).

b) The performances normally took place in some royal court, or a temple; *i. e.* not in a theatre properly speaking, as in Greece or Italy.

c) The contents and variability of performance of the plays is narrowly limited by Bhārata's «Nāṭyaśāstra»[16], a code prescribing even the most minute detail of stage, plot, characters, or movement. In no other country do we find similarly strict prescriptions defining a literary genre.

These are the reasons, and they are good reasons indeed, why the scholarly analysis of Indian dramas has remained within the scope of linguistics, philosophy, religious history, and folklore. No doubt such aspects must be part of a full-scale analysis of a play; but the question whether these plays can also be analysed from the point of view of general aesthetics or dramatic construction has not yet been raised. I am convinced that this, too, must be part of the examination of the value of a piece of dramatic writing.

In this paper I should like to present an attempt at analysing Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśakuntalam, laying the emphasis on questions of structure.

There are four well-distinguishable structural units in the Śakuntalā: Acts I to III, Acts IV, Act V and VI, and Act VII.

Examining the plot of the first three acts, we see the following story: a king arrives in an environment strange to him, where he finds a lover. Happiness, however, is not to last long, as they have to part; all that is left is the hope of meating again. This short sketch would in itself not indicate anything of special interest. It becomes interesting only when we realize that Acts V and VI, and Act VII respectively are repetition of the same story in a different garb.

In Act I the king arrives in the hermit's grove as a stranger: similarly in Act V Śakuntalā arrives at the king's court as an unexpected stranger. In the first three acts the central character is Śakuntalā: the essence of the story is the change in her life, her getting separated from her environment. In these events, a decisive role is played by the appearance of a stranger (the king), who compels, first with his presence and then with his departure (his absence) the young girl to change her life. In Act V and VI the same process takes place, but with the opposite cast: now the king is the central character, he is visited by a stranger (Śakuntalā), who compels the king, first by her presence and then by her disappearance, to change his life.

Act VII is the same story, enacted for the third time, now with the favourable ending obligatory on the Indian stage. Act VII is essentially a summary, a synthesis of the two previous versions. This is also indicated by the change of scene: it is no longer earthly nature (Śakuntalā's medium), nor the royal palace (the king's medium), but Hemakūṭa belonging to the divine world. Here neither of the two characters are at home, but they are both admitted, according to the rules of happy ending. The setting of the arrival of the king recalls that in Act I: in both cases he arrives as a stranger with the sole aim of greeting the head of the holy shrine. In neither case does he foresee the consequences of his visit. In Act I, just like in Act VII, instead of the intended encounter, another takes place: in the first act with Śakuntalā, in the last with his little son. The child in Act VII is the counterpart of Śakuntalā in Act I. The king and the child, too, meet for the first time, and this meeting evokes from the king feelings just as deep as those he felt on meeting Śakuntalā. Even the situation is the same: in both cases he has to rescue Śakuntalā, or the little boy, from an animal.

Śakuntalā and the child are both fighting with animals appropriate to their respective characters: the woman with a bee (an animal so frequently used in love-allegories by Indians), the boy with a lion (the son of the ruler of men with the descendant of the king of animals). Thus here the encounter is a higher-level one than in the first act: not only two people meet for once, but a family is united for good when Śakuntalā joins her husband and child.

The same story, then, is presented in three versions of decreasing lenght: first in three acts (this might be called a lyrical part), then in two (Act V and VI; the tragical part), and finally in one (Act VII; lyrical again). The decrease in lenght naturally results in mounting tension and quickening pace, through which the poet prevents the story becoming monotonous.

Act IV constitues a separate unit. This act – Śakuntalā's farewell to her home and environment – is considered by scholars to be the most powerful part of the play. Śakuntalā's serenity, beauty and innocence interwines with the serenity, beauty and innocence of the forest, the animals and plants. Śakuntalā does not simply live in nature: she has become one with it – Śakuntalā is nature herself. This is why the most lyrical part of her farewell is not the description of her parting with her father or her companions, but the depiction of how she has to part with her own self: nature. Śakuntalā's previous life is finished, her environment and people around them laments her. This mourning is understandable, as the maiden leaving her family is never to return to the environment, to the way of life she is leaving behind. Śakuntalā's farewell evokes in her environment the image of death. Since the Indian drama does not permit the enacting of death on the stage, what happens in this act can safely be called the summit of tragicalness. Structurally, the function of the fourth act is that of connecting: the main character's farewell to her home and life there, as well as her departure for a new home and a new life, both conclude the previous story and serve to prepare the next.

The feature of recurrence in the plot of the Śakuntalā can be detected not only in the large structural units, but in many small details, scene by scene. Here are some important recurring details:

In the first act the king arrives at the hermitage in a cart while on hunting. In Act VII he arrives in Hemakūṭa in a cart, after a fight. In both instances he describes the optical illusions caused by speed, referring to the fleeing gazelle and the landscape spreading beneath him, respectively.

In Act I the king secretly watches Śakuntalā and her two companions; in Act VII he becomes an unnoticed witness of the conversation between the little boy and his two governesses.

In Act I the king is excited to find out Śakuntalā's parentage, and receives a reassuring answer. In Act VII he is exactly as eager to find out the little boy's parentage.

Śakuntalā grew up in the hermit's forest without a mother, while her son grew up amidst the celestial hermits without a father. But as

Śakuntalā's mother did not forsake her in her distress, so the king, too, finds his child.

The king changes his clothes, *i.e.* alters his outlook before setting out for the hermitage (Act I). In Act V Śakuntalā appears in bride's adornment before the king, *i.e.* in clothes different from the usual: she has also changed her outlook.

The list could be continued, but so much may be sufficient to prove that these are not coincidental recurrences but the application of a conscious poetic method in the structuring of the play.

The clarification of the above described structural units and partial correspondences is important because it brings us nearer to defining the message of the play more exactly: Kālidāsa analyses in the Śakuntalā the possibility of attaining happiness, and for this reason he examines the same story in various situations. His maxim that can be drawn from the analysis is the following: happiness always depends on the environment: the attaining of happiness in this world is a mere illusion.

The first three acts suggest that happiness can be attained in nature, but it cannot be stable as the outside world can disturb this harmony. This is expressed by the close: the parting of the lovers at the end of the third act.

From Acts V and VI we learn that worldly life (a royal court) cannot be the scene of realization of happiness – in this environment the state of happiness cannot even be reached temporarily; the lovers are torn apart again.

Act VII leads us back into nature, the medium in which that happiness had been created. This nature, however, is no longer the earthly – *i.e.* no longer the disturbable – nature, but its celestial counterpart which is under the protection of the gods. Only here, in this divine world – though certainly a divine world brought closer to man – can Kālidāsa imagine the creation of indissoluble happiness.

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[4] *A. Bruguière:* Sacontala ou l'Anneau fatal. Paris 1803.

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